


Busting the Myth that Poor, Urban Schools Can't Succeed

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Document date: August 02, 2007

Released online: August 02, 2007

WASHINGTON, D.C., August 2, 2007 -- With the first bell of the new school year about to ring, a new book from the Urban Institute Press spotlights how urban schools serving low-income minority students can shine.

Good Schools in Poor Neighborhoods: Defying Demographics, Achieving Success, by Beatriz Chu Clewell and Patricia B. Campbell, with Lesley Perlman, combines solid data from original research with lively vignettes and vivid quotes from principals, teachers, parents, and students to present a picture of exceptional elementary schools in difficult academic environments.

Based on three years of research, the book differs from many others in the "effective schools" literature by contrasting high-scoring elementary schools with their more typical, struggling counterparts in two disparate, anonymous school systems: one serving predominately African-American students in a large, declining northeastern city (called Cumberland City in the study) and one serving Latino students in a growing, southwestern urban area (called Rios Calientes). In each area, the grade schools studied have the same demographic profile and the same union contracts and other district constraints, so the researchers could uncover the characteristics, policies, practices, and activities that make a real difference in early educational performance.

"As educational researchers, we know that while resources and socioeconomic factors play a role in student achievement, they are not the sole determinants of student success. Poor, urban schools can make a difference -- and some of them do," state Clewell, Campbell, and Perlman.

Clewell is a principal research associate and director of the Program for Evaluation and Equity Research at the Urban Institute. Campbell, a former professor of research, measurement, and statistics at Georgia State University, is president of Campbell-Kibler Associates, where Perlman was a research associate.

The Study and Its Findings

In each of the two sites examined, participants in a National Science Foundation math and science improvement initiative, five highly effective and three typical elementary schools were

selected. In these very different districts, the authors identified five characteristics that set successful schools apart from their lower-performing counterparts:

- Highly effective school principals are instructional leaders, encouraging innovation and other improvements.
- Highly effective schools have a higher-quality teaching force that appears more committed to its schools and more willing to "go the extra mile."
- Rios Calientes parents are much more likely to volunteer and to participate in activities in highly effective schools than in typical schools. In Cumberland City, the degree of parent participation is less striking; however, there are differences in parent attitudes and parent-friendly policies.
- Teachers in highly effective schools apply discipline more consistently and are more likely to take responsibility for disciplining their own and other teachers' students.
- Teachers in highly effective schools have higher expectations for their students. They are also more likely to take responsibility for their students' learning, and their principals are much more likely to expect teachers to do so.

Although both cities' effective schools share characteristics that differentiate them from typical schools, external factors affect how these differences play out. Among the most striking differences between the two districts are contrasts in student performance levels, the role of state and district educational policies, and the demographic and economic outlook of the regions.

The research, say the authors, has important implications for state and district policy as well as policy governing schools serving low-income minority students.

- A critical mass of "good" teachers is not enough. Principals should be selected for their knowledge of school reform, curriculum, and instruction, and ability to motivate staff.
- School policy should give parents the right to visit the school when they choose and to be kept informed of their children's progress.
- States and districts should provide incentives to attract and retain well-qualified teachers in low-income schools. Hiring decisions should be left to the schools.
- To the degree possible, teachers of similar cultures should be hired in schools where a nonmainstream culture predominates.
- Clear codes of discipline should be widely disseminated and consistently enforced.
- Special care should be taken to protect highly effective schools for low-income minority students during district upheaval and budget cuts.

"Finally, a book with complex contextual analyses that turns conventional educational wisdom on its head," says Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Candler Professor of Urban Education at Emory University. "The authors meticulously document that poverty can no longer be used as an excuse for low-achieving schools. This book is a powerful blueprint for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners who value high-quality, highly effective schools for all students."

Good Schools in Poor Neighborhoods: Defying Demographics, Achieving Success, by Beatriz Chu Clewell and Patricia B. Campbell, with Lesley Perlman, is available from the Urban Institute Press (paper, 6" x 9", 280 pages, ISBN 978-0-87766-742-1, \$29.50). Order online at <http://www.uiupress.org>, call 410-516-6956, or dial 1-800-537-5487 toll-free.

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